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Pakistan and Qatar: Constraints and Dilemmas

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Since June 5, 2017, Pakistan has faced what amounts to a Hobson's choice. Saudi Arabia has been asking its fellow Sunni Muslim ally: *"Are you with Qatar or with us?"* While Islamabad has expressed solidarity with Saudi Arabia and its people, and has always upheld the Saudi monarch's guardianship and jurisdiction over Islam's two most holy sites (Mecca and Medina), it has also reiterated that Pakistan has no plans to join the quartet (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) in severing ties with Doha. On the day the Qatar crisis erupted, Nafees Zakaria, a spokesperson for Pakistan's foreign ministry, **declared**: *"At the moment there is nothing on [the] Qatar issue, [we] will issue a statement if some development takes place."*

Nonetheless, to placate Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has offered to leverage its influence over Qatar to defuse the situation. For this purpose, then-Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised to visit Kuwait, Qatar, and Turkey. An official familiar with the development explained that Pakistan would merely complement Kuwait's efforts to deflate the crisis, rather than playing the role of a direct mediator between Qatar and its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and Egypt.

Constraints

Ever since the early 1970s, Pakistan has been a direct beneficiary of the economic *largesse* of oil-rich Saudi Arabia and other Arabian Peninsula states. This has been a result of concessionary balance-of-payments support to the economy; the subsidized provision of oil; contributions to Sunni-led charitable outfits/madrassahs; the importation of a permanent contingent of military-technical/training advisors; and the employment (and commensurate remittances) by semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

Since the 2015 formation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), Pakistan has been constrained to play a role in the Saudi-led coalition of 41 countries. The January 2017 appointment of IMAFT's first commander-in-chief, retired General Raheel Sharif (Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff), creates another conundrum for the Pakistani establishment—especially now that the military alliance has been conducting joint military exercises with partners and, reportedly, having a combatant role in Yemen.

Dilemmas

Many in Pakistan's significant Shi'ite population (around 15 percent of the country) occupy high civil and military positions. Caught up in the tensions between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite-majority neighbor Iran, they are likely to become far more vocal should Riyadh ever attempt to impose restrictions on Qatari/Iranian devotees' internationally recognized "right to worship" at Islam's two holiest places.

Pakistan is ironically considered a nation already embroiled in disputes with neighboring Afghanistan and India, both of which accuse Pakistan itself of offering support to hardline Salafist militant groups, including the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba. More importantly, Pakistan's progressive intellectuals have always considered their nation-state as a South Asian Muslim country - even before its formal creation - thanks to its historical ties with Iran and Turkey. For this same reason, Pakistan has been unwilling to take sides with Saudi Arabia in Yemen due to the Riyadh-led military coalition has launched its campaign against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

One of Pakistan's closest allies, Turkey, faces a similar complicated dilemma because of its close ties with Doha and Riyadh. On June 7, 2017, Turkey's parliament **endorsed** the deployment of Turkish troops in Qatar—not only as military support but also as a humanitarian gesture to supply essential goods and services. Ankara has remained steadfast in its defense of Doha throughout the three-month Qatar crisis.

Pakistan, too, has been striving to **broaden** its portfolio of alliances and economic opportunities. The foremost is the establishment of the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), and more recently, Qatar's launch (as the Gulf blockade continues) of a new direct route between the country's Hamad Port and Pakistan's Port of Karachi.

A Concluding Note

Fortunately, for the moment, Pakistan may not have to explicitly state its preference between Qatar and the "*quartet*" (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). This is because, for the foreseeable future, Saudi Arabia and Iran will remain at loggerheads over what Riyadh sees as Tehran's efforts to tighten its grip on the sub-region – from Iraq to Lebanon and from Syria to Yemen. Furthermore, the ill-fated diplomatic and economic boycott is not sustainable. As Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared, "*The era of cutting diplomatic ties and closing borders is over.*" Accordingly, diminishing returns from the three-and-a-half-month-old diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar—combined with growing attrition from the military venture in Yemen—may lead Saudi Arabia and the UAE (possibly the driver of the initiative) to look for some rapprochement with the Islamic Republic to mitigate the adverse effects of lingering regional conflicts.

Moreover, a flurry of diplomatic activity in the international arena (involving also the United States) indicates that the original ultimatum to Qatar by the Saudi/UAE-led bloc might be **whittled down** to a list of broad principles such as "*commitments to combat terrorism, extremism, to end acts of provocation, and incitement.*"

Finally, with the judicial ouster on July 28, 2017, of Pakistan's prime minister Nawaz Sharif, the country is embroiled in domestic political maneuvering by existing political parties and perhaps contending yet again with the perennial issue of civil-military relations. This turmoil could **postpone** the pursuit of outward-looking foreign policy considerations.

*Gulf State Analytics **published this article** on September 15, 2017*

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